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*Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction*

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## **Irony and the Use—Mention Distinction<sup>1</sup>**

**Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

An ironical utterance is traditionally analyzed as literally saying one thing and figuratively meaning the opposite. Thus the ironical remark *What lovely weather* would have the figurative meaning “*What awful weather*,” and so on.<sup>2</sup> An explicit semantic theory designed to incorporate such an account would have to provide, first, a definition of figurative meaning; second, a mechanism for deriving the figurative meaning of a sentence; and third, some basis for explaining why figurative utterances exist: why a speaker should prefer the ironical utterance *What lovely weather* to its literal counterpart *What awful weather* which, on this analysis, means exactly the same thing. It is because they provide no answers to such questions that traditional semantic accounts of irony ultimately fail.

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this chapter appeared in French in *Poétique*, 36, 399–412. We would like to thank Diane Brockway, Robyn Carston, and Julius Moravcsik for a number of helpful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Quintilian defines irony in terms of the fact that “we understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said [Quintilian IX. II, p. 44].” See also Turner, 1973, p. 216.

At first sight, Grice's (1975, 1978) pragmatic approach to irony looks more promising than the traditional semantic approach. Grice attempts to reanalyze the notion of figurative meaning in terms of his independently motivated category of conversational implicature. Thus, for Grice, ironical utterances would conversationally implicate, rather than figuratively mean, the opposite of what they literally say: *What lovely weather* would have no figurative meaning, but would conversationally implicate that the weather was awful. Grice's proposal would relieve semantic theory of the problems of defining figurative meaning and deriving the figurative meaning of an utterance. However, these problems are not solved simply by transferring them from the semantic to the pragmatic domain. It still has to be shown how the interpretation of ironical utterances can be successfully integrated into Grice's pragmatic framework. In this chapter we shall argue that it can not, and that existing pragmatic accounts of irony are as seriously defective as earlier semantic accounts.

Grice's departure from the traditional account of irony is not a radical one. It is based on the same assumption—the assumption that what the speaker of an ironical utterance intends to get across is the opposite of what he has literally said. In fact the only disagreement between Grice and more traditional theorists is over whether the substitution mechanisms involved are semantic or pragmatic. Grice's account, like the traditional one, fails to explain why an ironical utterance should ever be preferred to its literal counterpart: why someone should choose to say *What lovely weather* rather than the more transparent *What awful weather*. As will be seen, it also fails to make explicit exactly how the move from literal meaning to conversational implicature is made in the case of irony. Finally, it fails to show that the "conversational implicatures" involved in irony are of the same type as the more standard cases of conversational implicature to which they are supposed to be assimilated. For these reasons, Grice's purely pragmatic account of irony also fails.

In this chapter, we offer an account of irony that goes some way toward solving the problem raised by both traditional semantic and pragmatic approaches. In particular, it explains why ironical utterances are made, and why they occasionally (but not always) implicate the opposite of what they literally say. Unlike the traditional theory, it makes no reference to the notion of figurative meaning. Unlike both the traditional theory and Grice's account, it involves no substitution mechanism, whether semantic or pragmatic. Unlike Grice's theory, it assumes that there is a necessary (though not sufficient) semantic condition for an utterance to be ironical. Furthermore, the crucial fact that ironical utterances convey not only propositions (which can be accounted for in terms of meaning and impli-

cature), but also vaguer suggestions of images and attitudes, finds a natural description in the framework we propose.

## 2. SOME METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

There are a number of obvious similarities between linguistics and the study of rhetoric. Rhetorical judgments, like linguistic judgments, are ultimately based on intuition; rhetoric, like linguistics, is a branch of cognitive psychology. It is well known that linguistic judgments may be affected by explicit teaching or conscious theorizing; the same is true of rhetorical judgements, only much more so, because many rhetorical categories such as "metaphor," "figurative," or "irony" are part of everyday speech. Because of this, informant work in rhetoric must be approached with a certain amount of methodological caution.

For example, suppose we ask an informant whether (1) or (2) could be ironical when said by someone caught in a downpour:

- (1) *What lovely weather.*
- (2) *It seems to be raining.*

Anyone who has been taught the traditional definition of irony, that ironical utterances say one thing and mean the opposite, will naturally say that (1), but not (2), is ironical. He will say this even though he may notice that both (1) and (2) could be said in the same (wry) tone of voice which a naive informant would precisely call ironical. Given enough responses of this type, we might well take the traditional definition of irony as being strongly confirmed; however, this would be a mistake, since it is the definition itself that is directly responsible for the judgments which "confirm" it.

The best way of avoiding these pitfalls is to ask questions that have no stereotyped response. The ultimate goal is to find intuitive relationships among the data, intuitive ways of grouping them, which do not simply reflect conscious, explicitly defined categories. This is not because stereotyped responses or conscious categories are uninteresting, but because they only provide insight into cultural peculiarities or idiosyncrasies. A GENERAL theory of rhetoric should be concerned with basic psychological and interpretative mechanisms which remain invariant from culture to culture.

There is another, closely related point. The traditional study of rhetoric, which dates back 2000 years, offers a rich and subtle set of analytical

concepts. These concepts are interesting in themselves; it is possible that some of them will have a necessary role to play in any future theory of rhetoric. However, it would be a mistake to prejudge the issue. It should not be taken for granted that even the major rhetorical categories, such as alliteration, ellipsis, hyperbole, metaphor, metonymy, irony, and so on, correspond to genuine natural classes of facts, playing clearly defined and distinguishable roles in speech production and perception. It is possible that the whole idea of tropes and their classification is destined to go the same way as the notion of humors in medicine; it is possible that verbal irony and its associated attitude have about as much claim on our attention as black bile and the atrabilious temperament.

The notion of irony is an abstract one, based on a rather arbitrary range of examples which have themselves been rather inadequately described. Because of this, it seems to us to be a mistake to take IRONY itself as the object of investigation, and to limit one's attention to its more standard cases. There is a whole range of utterance-types that can be more or less loosely called ironical. The basic facts to be accounted for are the particular effects produced by particular utterances, and the perceived similarities among them. We should be looking for psychological mechanisms that can account for these effects and their interrelationships. When we have found some, it might be interesting to make some comparisons between the resulting (provisional) conceptual scheme and the framework of classical rhetoric, to see which notion of irony emerges, if any; but the existence of a unified category of irony should not be taken for granted.

Quite independently of the existence of irony, there are already strong grounds for rejecting the notion of figurative meaning itself. For example, consider the treatment of disambiguation, which is a major problem for any pragmatic theory. Every hearer (or reader) almost instantaneously disambiguates each of the utterances he hears. Even if we ignore figurative meanings, and consider only the literal senses of an utterance, narrowly defined, almost every utterance is ambiguous. In fact, almost every utterance is multiply ambiguous, with possible semantic interactions among its individual ambiguous constructions. Most utterances also contain referential expressions which may have a wide range of possible referents, even when the shared knowledge of speaker and hearer is taken into account. It is thus quite typical for an utterance to have dozens, or even hundreds, of possible propositional interpretations. However, speaker and hearer are normally able to select a single one of these interpretations without even realizing that they have made a choice. It is generally agreed that this choice is a function of the context; but to define the function, as opposed to simply claiming that it exists, is no easy task.

As long as we only have to choose among the literal senses of an utter-

ance, the task is still an approachable one; the set of possible interpretations remains finite, and will be specifiable on the basis of a fairly restricted range of semantic and referential variables. One can think of several types of explicit procedures that could be used to eliminate all but one of the possible interpretations. The difficulty lies not so much in conceiving of such a procedure in principle, as in choosing and justifying the right one. On the other hand, suppose that we have to take into account not only the literal senses of an utterance, but also the whole range of figurative senses that are loosely based on them via relations of resemblance, contiguity, inclusion or inversion; in this case, the set of possible interpretations becomes to all intents and purposes nonenumerable. And if this is so, it is hard to see how one could even set about giving an account of disambiguation, which is not, we repeat, a rare and marginal phenomenon, but a basic factor in the interpretation of every utterance.

Thus the notion of figurative meaning, whatever its value for the analysis of figures of speech, becomes a real source of difficulty as soon as we look at other aspects of the interpretation of utterances. The question is whether these difficulties are caused by the complexity of the data—which cannot be ignored—or whether they result from some inadequacy in the concepts being used to analyze them.

Obviously, a speaker may sometimes intend to convey something other than one of the literal senses of his utterance. When he wants to convey something IN ADDITION TO one of the literal senses, the notion of conversational implicature is relevant. This presents no problem for a theory of disambiguation; on the contrary, it has a role to play in such a theory. If figurative meaning could be analyzed in terms of conversational implicature, as Grice has proposed, disambiguation would be fairly straightforward. However, in the case of figurative language, the speaker normally intends to convey something INSTEAD OF one of the literal senses of his utterance; the implicature has to be seen as SUBSTITUTING FOR the literal sense. The idea that an implicature could actually contradict the literal sense of an utterance—as it would in the case of irony—does not square with Grice's central claim that implicatures act as premises in an argument designed to establish that the speaker has observed the maxims of conversation in saying what he said. It follows that the interpretation of ironical utterances cannot be reduced to the search for conversational implicatures without grossly distorting the notion of implicature itself. Grice does not succeed in integrating figurative interpretations into his overall pragmatic theory.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed discussion of Grice's treatment of figurative language, see Wilson and Sperber (forthcoming).

This being so, if the substitution theory of irony is correct, some notion of figurative meaning seems called for, and the problems it gives rise to seem to be forced on us by the data themselves. However, if it were possible to give just as good an account of the data, but without any appeal to the notion of figurative meaning, and using only independently motivated concepts (literal sense, implicature, etc.), it is clear that this would be preferable to the traditional account. An approach along these lines has already been suggested for the cases of metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy in Sperber 1975b; in this chapter we attempt to extend the analysis to irony. The problem will be taken up in more detail in Sperber and Wilson (forthcoming).

### 3. SOME BASIC DATA

Consider the utterances in (1) and (2) (repeated here for convenience) and (3)–(8), exchanged between two people caught in a downpour in circumstances that are otherwise normal:

- (1) *What lovely weather.*
- (2) *It seems to be raining.*
- (3) *I'm glad we didn't bother to bring an umbrella.*
- (4) *Did you remember to water the flowers?*
- (5) *What awful weather.*
- (6) *It seems to be thundering.*
- (7) *I'm sorry we didn't bother to bring an umbrella.*
- (8) *Did you remember to bring in the washing?*

There are two obvious ways of grouping these examples. First, there are close syntactic and lexical parallels between (1) and (5), (2) and (6), (3) and (7), and (4) and (8). Second, in a less straightforwardly definable way, (1)–(4) have something in common which distinguishes them from (5)–(8). Consider (1)–(4) in turn.

*What lovely weather.* In the circumstances described, it is inconceivable that the speaker meant to get across the literal meaning of his utterance. In fact, it is certain that he believes the opposite of what he has said. However, it is not so obvious that it was this belief that he primarily intended to get across, as would be claimed by both the semantic and pragmatic accounts of irony referred to above. In the first place, suppose this

was his primary intention: How would it be recognized? Ironical utterances are not always distinguishable by intonation from their literal counterparts. When there is no distinctive intonation, it is clear that the choice between literal and ironical interpretation must be based on information external to the utterance—contextual knowledge and other background assumptions—rather than the form or content of the utterance itself. Where such external information is lacking—for example where (1) is said in the course of a long distance telephone call—then the utterance would certainly be taken as literal. In other words, knowing the speaker's beliefs about the weather is a precondition for, rather than a consequence of, recognizing that his utterance was ironical. The standard approach to irony, which claims that the main point of an ironical utterance is to convey the opposite of what is said, would thus make every ironical utterance uninformative, both on the level of what is said and on the level of what is implicated. The speaker would be intending to communicate a certain belief, but, in the absence of any special intonation, his intention would only be recognized by someone who already knew that he held that belief.

We have already mentioned another problem with this account. If the speaker of (1) meant to indicate that he thought the weather was awful, why not say so directly? What is the point of the indirect approach? What difference is there between saying *What lovely weather* ironically, and *What awful weather* literally? On both standard semantic and pragmatic accounts, there is nothing to choose between these two remarks, and therefore no particular reason for ever being ironical.<sup>4</sup> This is clearly not right. Moreover, the data do not entirely support the standard description of ironical utterances.

The only clear intuition is that the speaker of (1) does not mean what he has literally said, and lets it be understood that what he has literally said is the opposite of what he really believes. Obviously, his real beliefs can be deduced from this, but we cannot necessarily conclude that his main intention—or even a subsidiary intention—was to get these beliefs across. He might instead have been trying to express an opinion, not about the weather, but about the content of (1) itself—to indicate, for example, that it had been ridiculous to hope that the weather would be lovely.

*It seems to be raining.* This clearly does not express the opposite of what the speaker thinks; it just expresses LESS than what he thinks. Whereas (1) was odd because the speaker did not believe what he said, (2) is odd because its truth is so patently obvious. Although it might have been relevant or informative as the first few drops of rain were falling, in the middle of a downpour it could never be seriously made except by

<sup>4</sup> A similar point is made in Harnish 1976.

someone with incredibly slow reactions. The speaker is not trying to pretend that he is such a person; nor is he parodying anyone in particular. What he is trying to do is to bring to mind just this exaggerated slowness of reaction which would itself be worth remarking on in the circumstances. For an utterance to have this effect, it must be obvious that the speaker is drawing attention to its content, while at the same time dissociating himself from it. What is important is the content of the utterance, rather than what it is about.

*I'm glad we didn't bother to bring an umbrella.* Like (1), this is a case where the utterance does not directly reflect the speaker's views; where in fact he believes the opposite of what he says. One could imagine (3) being used to echo an earlier remark made to, or by, the speaker or hearer before setting off: *Don't bother to take an umbrella*, or *Let's not bother to take an umbrella*, for example. By repeating this advice in the pouring rain, the speaker of (3) underlines its futility.

Clearly someone who asks *Did you remember to water the flowers?* cannot mean the opposite of what he says. Indeed it is hard to see what would BE the opposite of (4), or of most other ironical questions. This is a further argument against both standard semantic and pragmatic accounts of irony. The question in (4) is odd because, like (2), it is so obviously irrelevant in the circumstances. The speaker is not interested in the answer; he is much more likely to have asked the question precisely to highlight its irrelevance and the pointlessness of asking or answering it in the circumstances. If we also suppose that the hearer is fanatical about keeping his flowers watered, (3) will have the further implication that the question is USUALLY pointless, and that the hearer's obsession is ridiculous. Thus, what the speaker actually communicates is not question (4) itself, but an attitude to it and to the state of mind that might give rise to it.

Although incomplete and imprecise, these observations about (1)–(4) do at least make clear what these utterances have in common that distinguishes them from (5)–(8). Someone who utters (1)–(4) cannot but dissociate himself from the content of his utterance, either because it is clearly false, as in (1) and (3), or because it is clearly irrelevant, as in (2) and (4). The only way to understand him is to assume that he is expressing a belief ABOUT his utterance, rather than BY MEANS OF it. What (1)–(4) express is an attitude of the speaker to his utterance, whereas what (5)–(8) express is an attitude of the speaker to what his utterance is about: the weather, the rain, and the appropriate steps for dealing with them. This distinction between two basic types of utterance is entirely missed by both standard semantic and pragmatic accounts of irony. On both standard accounts, the ironical utterance of (1) is about the weather, and is thus indistinguishable from the literal utterance *What awful weather*. On our account, there

is a crucial difference between the two utterances, because one expresses an attitude to the content of an utterance, whereas the other expresses an attitude to the weather.

#### 4. THE USE-MENTION DISTINCTION

The intuitive distinction we have just illustrated using (1)–(4) and (5)–(8) as examples is closely related to the distinction drawn in philosophy between the USE and MENTION of an expression. USE of an expression involves reference to what the expression refers to; MENTION of an expression involves reference to the expression itself. Thus *marginal* is used in (9) to refer to the doubtful grammatical status of certain examples:

- (9) *These examples are rare and marginal.*

It is mentioned in (10a) and (10b), where reference is made to the word *marginal* itself:

- (10) a. *"Marginal" is a technical term.*  
b. *Who had the nerve to call my examples marginal?*

When the expression mentioned is a complete sentence, it does not have the illocutionary force it would standardly have in a context where it was used. Thus, the remark in (11a) is uttered in (11b) without actually being made, the question in (12a) is uttered in (12b) without actually being asked, and the order in (13a) is uttered in (13b) without actually being given:

- (11) a. *What a shame!*  
b. *Don't just say "What a shame"; do something.*  
(12) a. *What is irony?*  
b. *"What is irony?" is the wrong question.*  
(13) a. *Be quiet!*  
c. *"Be quiet! Be quiet!" And suppose I feel like talking?*

This may be used as a test for distinguishing between use and mention of sentences.

The use-mention distinction is a logical one. In formal languages, mention is distinguished from use in a conventional way, and there can be no question about whether a formula contains a mention, nor about what is being mentioned. In natural languages, mentions take a variety of forms, some of which might seem to be intermediate cases, falling somewhere between use and mention. Moreover, cases of mention in natural

languages are not usually studied in their own right, but only for the role they play within the frameworks of either "reported speech" or "opaque contexts." Both frameworks are inappropriate for the study of mention; they are too broad in some respects and too narrow in others.

The reported speech framework is too broad because there are standard cases of indirect speech such as (14), where the indirectly reported proposition (15) is part of a larger proposition, and there is no demarcation line, explicit or implicit, to set it off as a case of mention:

(14) *They say that it is going to rain.*

(15) *It is going to rain.*

The reported speech framework is also too narrow, because a number of clear cases of mention do not involve any report of speech, even in the very loose usual acceptation. Sentences (16) and (17) are examples:

(16) *A yellow flag means "stay away."*

(17) *"Stay away" is a grammatical sentence.*

The opaque context framework is too broad because it covers cases of indirect speech such as (14), (18) and (19), which clearly fall outside the scope of any notion of mention, however extended:

(18) *Oedipus wanted to marry Jocasta.*

(19) *Oedipus wanted to marry his mother.*

The contexts in (18) and (19) are opaque, since the substitution of the coreferential expressions *Jocasta* and *his mother* is not truth-preserving. However, we would not want to say that these expressions are mentioned. The notion of opaque context, as usually understood, is also too narrow, because it does not account for cases such as (13b) (where "*Be quiet! Be quiet!*" is certainly mentioned, but where no opaque context is involved; see also (27)–(30) in what follows). One could of course say that the null context is opaque under certain conditions, but the conditions would have to be defined.

There is a real need for a comprehensive account of mention in natural language, which would cover not only mention of an expression, as in (11)–(13), but also mention of a proposition, as in what is usually referred to as "free indirect style."<sup>5</sup> In free indirect style, an independent proposition is reported with an optional comment in a parenthetical phrase, as in (20):

<sup>5</sup> For recent work on free indirect style, see Banfield 1973 and McHale 1978.

(20) *He will come at five, he says.*

It seems clear that (20) is equivalent in logical structure to (21) rather than (22), and is therefore a genuine case of mention:

(21) *"I will come at five," he says.*

(22) *He says that he will come at five.*

There are thus two properties that may be used to distinguish various types of mention in natural language; looking at these, one can see why it is sometimes felt that there are intermediate cases between the poles of pure use and pure mention. On the one hand, we can contrast explicit mention, as in (23) and (25), with implicit mention, as in (24) and (26). On the other hand, we can contrast the two different types of object that may be mentioned: linguistic expressions, as in (23) and (24), and propositions, as in (25) and (26):

(23) *The master began to understand and to share the intense disgust which the archdeacon always expressed when Mrs Proudie's name was mentioned. "What am I to do with such a woman as this?" he asked himself.*

(24) *The master began to understand and to share the intense disgust which the archdeacon always expressed when Mrs Proudie's name was mentioned. "What am I to do with such a woman as this?"*

(25) *The master began to understand and to share the intense disgust which the archdeacon always expressed when Mrs Proudie's name was mentioned. What was he to do with such a woman as this, he asked himself.*

(26) *The master began to understand and to share the intense disgust which the archdeacon always expressed when Mrs Proudie's name was mentioned. What was he to do with such a woman as this?*

[Trollope, *Barchester Towers*]

In formal language, only the explicit mention of an expression is possible; this is illustrated in (23). However, implicit mention of an expression, as in (24), explicit mention of a proposition, as in (25), and implicit mention of a proposition, as in (26), are equally clear cases of mention from a logical point of view, unless the concept of mention is arbitrarily restricted to mention of expressions. It is from a linguistic point of view that mention of a proposition is harder to identify than mention of an expres-

sion, and implicit mention harder to identify than explicit mention; hence the impression that there are mixed forms. The most difficult cases to identify are those where a proposition is implicitly mentioned. When the context gives no indication that the free indirect style is being used for reporting speech—as in (26), for example,—it is often possible to process an utterance quite satisfactorily without consciously noticing that it is an utterance of a particular logical type, closely related to quotation. When the mention does not involve reported speech proper, it is less easily identifiable still, and it would not be too much of a surprise to come across whole classes of implicit mention of propositions that have so far been overlooked or misinterpreted. Ironical utterances are a case in point.

## 5. IRONY AS ECHOIC MENTION

Consider the following exchanges:

- (27) a. *I've got a toothache.*  
b. *Oh, you've got a toothache. Open your mouth, and let's have a look.*
- (28) a. *Where can I buy pretzels at this time of night?*  
b. *Where can you buy pretzels? At this time of night? At Barney's, of course.*
- (29) a. *I'm tired.*  
b. *You're tired. And what do you think I am?*
- (30) a. Doolittle: *Listen here, Governor. You and me is men of the world, ain't we?*  
b. Higgins: *Oh! Men of the world, are we? You'd better go, Mrs Pearce.*

[G. B. Shaw, *Pygmalion*]

In these examples, the propositions used in (a) are implicitly mentioned in the responses in (b). These cases of mention are clearly not reported speech, in the sense that they are not intended to inform anyone of the content of a preceding utterance (such an intention would be pointless, since the utterance has only just occurred). Rather, they are meant to indicate that the preceding utterance has been heard and understood, and to express the hearer's immediate reaction to it. Apart from this instant echoing of a preceding utterance, there are also cases of echoic mention that are less directly related to what has gone before—for instance, where the proposition mentioned is not the one just uttered but what the hearer takes to be one of its pragmatic implications:

- (31) a. *I'm a reasonable man.*  
b. *Whereas I'm not (is what you're implying).*

There are cases where what is echoed is not an immediately preceding utterance, but one that occurred some time ago:

- (32) *It absolutely poured. I know, it was going to rain (you told me so). I should listen to you more often.*

There are cases of echoing where the sources are very distant indeed:

- (33) *Jack elbowed Bill, and Bill punched him on the nose. He should have turned the other cheek (as it says in the Bible). Maybe that would have been the best thing to do.*

There are also what one might call anticipatory echoes:

- (34) *You're going to do something silly. You're free to do what you want (you'll tell me). Maybe so. But you still ought to listen to me.*

Such cases of echoic mention are extremely common in ordinary conversation, and considerably more varied than we have time to show here. In each case, the speaker's choice of words, his tone (doubtful, questioning, scornful, contemptuous, approving, and so on), and the immediate context, all play a part in indicating his own attitude to the proposition mentioned. In particular, the speaker may echo a remark in such a way as to suggest that he finds it untrue, inappropriate, or irrelevant:

- (35) ‘*You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns*’, said Darcy in a less tranquil tone, and with a heightened colour.

‘*Who that knows what his misfortunes have been, can help feeling an interest in him?*’

‘*His misfortunes!* repeated Darcy contemptuously, ‘*yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed.*’

[Jane Austen; *Pride and Prejudice*]

- (36) ‘*Now just attend to me for a bit, Mr. Pitch, or Witch, or Stitch, or whatever your name is.*’

‘*My name is Pinch*’, observed Tom. ‘*Have the goodness to call me by it.*’

‘*What! You mustn't ever be called out of your name, mustn't you?*’ cried Jonas. ‘*Pauper 'prentices are looking up, I think. Ecod, we manage 'em a little better in the city!*’

[Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*]

There are also cases where what is echoed is not a proposition expressed by an utterance, but a thought imputed by the speaker to the hearer:

- (37) *Elinor looked at him with greater astonishment than ever. She began to think he must be in liquor; . . . and with this impression she immediately rose, saying,*

*'Mr Willoughby, I advise you at present to return to Combe—I am not at leisure to remain with you longer.—Whatever your business may be with me, it will be better recollected and explained tomorrow.'*

*'I understand you,' he replied, with an expressive smile, and a voice perfectly calm, 'yes, I am very drunk.—A pint of porter with my cold beef at Marlborough was enough to over-set me.'*

[Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*]

We have presented examples (35)–(37) as cases of echoic mention; we could equally well have presented them as cases of irony. The utterances in question are patently ironical: The speaker mentions a proposition in such a way as to make clear that he rejects it as ludicrously false, inappropriate, or irrelevant. For the hearer, understanding such an utterance involves both realizing that it is a case of mention rather than use, and also recognizing the speaker's attitude to the proposition mentioned. The whole interpretation depends on this double recognition. Recovery of the implicatures (38) for (35), (39) for (36) and (40) for (37) will follow automatically:

- (38) *He has not been the victim of misfortunes.*  
 (39) *You have no right to demand that I call you by your proper name.*  
 (40) *I am not drunk.*

Not only is it unnecessary to appeal to the notion of figurative meaning in dealing with the interpretation of (35)–(37) [and their implicatures (38)–(40)], any account in terms of figurative meaning will actually be incomplete. Suppose we treat (38)–(40) along traditional lines, as figurative senses rather than implicatures of (35)–(37). Then either the proposition that constitutes the figurative meaning must be understood as USED, and the status of the utterance as echoic mention will disappear; or it will be understood as MENTIONED, and since it is not patently false, inappropriate or irrelevant, there will be no way of explaining the speaker's attitude of mockery or disapproval. Either way, an account in terms of figurative meaning will necessarily overlook a central and obvious aspect of the interpretation of the utterance.

The analysis we are proposing, although it involves implicatures, dif-

fers from Grice's in at least two important respects. Grice sees violation of the maxim of truthfulness as both a necessary and a sufficient condition for ironical interpretation. When an utterance is patently false, he argues, the hearer interprets it as implicating the contradictory of what was literally said. We have already mentioned one problem with this account: Unlike standard implicatures, the "implicature" carried by an ironical utterance must be substituted for, rather than added to, what was literally said, because otherwise the total message conveyed would be a contradiction. A more general problem is that violation of the maxim of truthfulness is in fact neither necessary nor sufficient for ironical interpretation. It is not necessary because of the existence of ironical questions, ironical understatements, and ironical references to the inappropriateness or irrelevance of an utterance rather than to the fact that it is false. Numerous illustrations have been given earlier in the chapter. Furthermore, as Grice himself points out (1978), patent falsehood or irrelevance is not a sufficient condition for irony—not every false or irrelevant utterance can be interpreted as ironical. What is missing from Grice's account is precisely the fact that ironical utterances are cases of mention, and that the propositions mentioned are ones that have been, or might have been, actually entertained by someone.

On our analysis, recognition of an ironical utterance as a case of mention is crucial to its interpretation. Once the hearer has recognized this, and has seen the speaker's attitude to the proposition mentioned, the implicatures in (38)–(40) follow by standard reasoning processes. They are typical cases of conversational implicature, and not problematic in any way. Our account of irony thus fits more naturally into Grice's overall framework than the account he himself proposes.

It might be suggested that there are two distinct types of irony: "echoic" irony, as illustrated earlier, whose interpretation involves a recognition of its status as mention, and "standard" irony, whose interpretations involves a recovery of its figurative meaning.<sup>6</sup> The problem with this suggestion is that there is a whole range of intermediate cases between the clear cases of echoic irony and the "standard" cases (see below). If there were two totally distinct processes, one based on mention and the other on figurative meaning, each resulting in a different type of irony, such intermediate cases should not exist.

It seems more accurate to say that all examples of irony are interpreted as echoic mentions, but that there are echoic mentions of many different degrees and types. Some are immediate echoes, and others delayed; some

<sup>6</sup> See for example Cutler (1974), who distinguishes between "spontaneous" (standard) and "provoked" (echoic) irony.

have their source in actual utterances, others in thoughts or opinions; some have a real source, others an imagined one; some are traceable back to a particular individual, whereas others have a vaguer origin. When the echoic character of the utterance is not immediately obvious, it is nevertheless suggested. Within this framework, we return to our original examples of irony, Sentences (1)–(4).

*What lovely weather.* Suppose that, as we were deciding to set off on our walk, someone told us that the weather was going to be lovely. It is quite clear that (1) is an ironical echo of this remark. Or suppose we have spent a rainy winter talking about the walks we will have in the summer sun. The echoic quality of (1), though its source is more distant, is nonetheless clear. Even when there is no prior utterance some vague echoing is still involved. One normally sets off for a walk in the hope or expectation of good weather: *What lovely weather* may simply echo these earlier high hopes. In all these cases the remark in (1) is interpreted along exactly the same lines. There is no question of a move from one figure of speech to another, or one type of irony to another, with quite different interpretation processes being involved; the only move is from obvious cases of echoic mention to much vaguer (and duller) varieties of the same thing.

*It seems to be raining.* Suppose someone had originally made this remark just as the rain was starting. By repeating it in the middle of a downpour, the speaker of (2) shows how laughable it was, in retrospect, to be in any doubt about whether it was really raining. Even when there is no prior utterance, (2) would have a similar effect: By pretending a degree of hesitancy which is completely inappropriate in the circumstances, it conjures up a picture of a quite ludicrous degree of inattention or failure to react.

It should be obvious without further contextualisation that (3) (*I'm glad we didn't bother to bring an umbrella*) and (4) (*Did you remember to water the flowers?*) are naturally interpreted as ironical echoes of advice on the one hand, and obsession on the other, which are both totally irrelevant in the circumstances. Whether the advice was actually given or not, whether the obsession was put into words or not, does not affect the status of the utterance as echoic mention, but only its degree of pointedness.

What we are claiming is that all standard cases of irony, and many that are nonstandard from the traditional point of view, involve (generally implicit) mention of a proposition. These cases of mention are interpreted as echoing a remark or opinion that the speaker wants to characterize as ludicrously inappropriate or irrelevant. This account makes it possible to give a more detailed description of a much wider range of examples of irony than the traditional approach can handle. In particular, it provides a unified treatment of ironical antiphrasis and meiosis, which are traditionally regarded as two quite different things. Moreover, it makes no appeal

to the notion of figurative meaning, nor to any other notion not fully justified on independent grounds.<sup>7</sup>

## 6. SOME FURTHER ASPECTS OF IRONY

Our analysis sheds some light on a number of further problems with the treatment of irony. We shall mention five of them here. Four we shall deal with rather briefly: the relation between irony and parody, the “ironical tone of voice,” the shifts in style or register that often occur in ironical utterances, and the moralistic overtones that they sometimes have. The last problem, which we shall look at in more detail, has to do with the fact that ironical utterances often seem to be aimed at a particular target or victim.

1. According to the traditional analysis, irony and parody involve quite different production and interpretation processes: Irony involves change of meaning, whereas parody involves imitation. There is no necessary relation between the two, and any similarities that exist must result from similarities in the attitudes of ironist and parodist. If irony is a type of mention, however, it is easy to account for the similarities and differences between irony and parody, and for the fact that intermediate cases exist. Both irony and parody are types of mention: Irony involves mention of propositions; parody involves mention of linguistic expressions. In other words, parody is related to direct discourse as irony is to free indirect discourse.

2. Within the traditional framework, the existence of an “ironical tone of voice” is rather puzzling. Why not also a “metaphorical tone of voice,” a “synecdochical tone of voice,” and so on? When irony is seen as a type of mention, the ironical tone of voice falls quite naturally into place: It is merely one of the variety of tones (doubtful, approving, contemptuous, and so on) that the speaker may use to indicate his attitude to the utterance or opinion mentioned.

3. It is well known that ironical utterances often involve a switch in style or register. For example, it is quite common to show that one's utterance is ironical by changing to a more formal or pompous style:

<sup>7</sup> It is widely accepted, though not entirely uncontroversial, that free indirect speech may be used to ironic effect (see McHale 1978, p. 275–276 and references therein). What is lacking in the extensive literature on this subject is any attempt, on the one hand, to explain why this connection should exist, and on the other hand, to construct a unified theoretical account of irony around it. In this article, we hope to have shown that such an attempt is worth making.

- (41) *That's done it—you've broken the vase. I hope you're satisfied, my lady.*

There is nothing in the traditional account of irony that would lead one to expect such shifts. However, they can be quite easily explained on the assumption that irony involves echoic mention of a real or imagined utterance or opinion. [In (41) the speaker is echoing the sort of deferential remark that he implies the hearer is expecting.] As in free indirect discourse, the implicit mention of a proposition sometimes involves mention of an expression.

4. From the point of view of the traditional theory, there is a strange asymmetry in the uses of irony. One is much more likely to say *How clever* to imply "How stupid," or *How graceful* to imply "How clumsy," than the other way round. This connection of irony with implications of failure to reach a certain standard has often been noted. There is no explanation for it in terms of the traditional process of meaning-inversion, which should be able to work just as well in one direction as in the other. However, on our account there is a straightforward explanation. Standards or rules of behavior are culturally defined, commonly known, and frequently invoked; they are thus always available for echoic mention. On the other hand, critical judgements are particular to a given individual or occasion, and are thus only occasionally available for mention. Hence, it is always possible to say ironically of a failure *That was a great success*, since it is normal to hope for the success of a given course of action. However, to say of a success *That was a failure* without the irony falling flat, the speaker must be able to refer back to prior doubts or fears, which he can then echo ironically. In the face of an imperfect reality, it is always possible to make ironical mention of the norm. In the face of a perfect reality, there must be past doubts or fears to echo if the mention of a critical judgment is to count as ironical.

5. The claim that ironical utterances are aimed at a particular target or victim is based on a variety of intuitions, sometimes clear-cut, sometimes less so. Within the traditional framework, there are two quite separate processes that might account for this aspect of irony.

On the one hand, every utterance whose literal sense would carry overtones of approval will have a corresponding figurative sense with critical overtones. The intended victim, on this account, would be the object of the criticism. For example, if (42) has the figurative meaning (43), then Fitzgerald would be the victim of the irony in (42):

- (42) *Fitzgerald plays by the rules.*  
 (43) *Fitzgerald cheats.*

On the other hand, the person to whom the ironical utterance was apparently addressed may fail to detect its figurative meaning. The immediate result will be that any third parties present (who immediately detect the figurative meaning and are thus revealed as the true addressees of the irony) will feel drawn into a conspiracy with the speaker, at the expense of the person to whom the remark was overtly made. For example, if (44) has the figurative meaning (45), and if Billy fails to notice this, then on this account Billy becomes the intended victim of the irony in (44):

- (44) *Go on, Billy, you're nearly there!*  
 (45) *Go on, Billy, you're nowhere near!*

These two processes may on occasion select the same victim. This would happen, for example, if (46) has the figurative meaning (47), and Jeremy fails to detect it:

- (46) *Go on, Jeremy, your story's really interesting.*  
 (47) *Don't go on, Jeremy. Your story's really boring.*

Someone who restricts himself to examples of this last type, as happens rather too often, would get the misleading impression that the traditional theory can provide a unified account of how an ironical utterance chooses its victim. However, anyone who looks at the differences between examples like (42) and (44) will immediately see that two quite different processes are involved, and that they are not necessarily related at all.

Moreover, it is easy to think of quite ordinary examples that are not accounted for in terms of either process. Suppose the following remark is made ironically to someone who dislikes classical music:

- (48) *Of course all classical music sounds the same!*

On the one hand, the figurative meaning of this remark has no critical content; on the other hand, in normal circumstances the hearer is unlikely to mistake the speaker's intentions. In this case, neither process will apply, and there is no immediate explanation within the traditional framework for the clear intuition that the hearer of (48) is also its intended victim.

Within our framework it would be possible to define two processes that would correspond closely to those used in the traditional account. Instead of figurative meanings, there would be pragmatic implications or implicatures which might carry critical overtones; instead of a failure to distinguish literal from figurative meanings there would be a failure to distinguish use from mention. The framework we are proposing is thus at least as explanatory in this respect as the traditional framework.

However, the analysis of irony as a type of mention does involve a quite central claim which has no equivalent in the traditional framework, and which by itself provides a more satisfactory explanation for a much wider range of intuitions. Within our framework, an ironical remark will have as natural target the originators, real or imagined, of the utterances or opinions being echoed. If the remark also carries critical overtones, or if the hearer fails to detect the speaker's ironical intent, the ironical effect may of course be reinforced, but it may equally well be achieved when neither of these conditions is present.

In example (46) the victim is Jeremy, because the utterance echoes an opinion of himself that he expects to hear. In (44) the target is Billy, because the utterance echoes an opinion imputed to him, that he is nearly there. In (42) the victims are all those who think or claim that Fitzgerald plays by the rules: Fitzgerald himself, and in certain circumstances the hearer too, will be a victim in virtue of this. In (48), it is the hearer who is the victim, because the utterance echoes an opinion he is believed to hold. In (1), if the weather forecast has predicted good weather, it is this forecast that is echoed in the remark "*What lovely weather*"; on the other hand, if no one in particular has actually made such a prediction, our account correctly predicts that the irony is not aimed at any particular victim.

The analysis of irony as a type of mention thus makes it possible to predict which ironical utterances will have a particular victim, and who that victim will be. When the utterance or opinion echoed has no specific originator, there will be no victim; when there is a specific, recognizable originator, he will be the victim. Thus, when the speaker echoes himself, the irony will be self-directed; when he echoes his hearer, the result will be sarcasm. In the traditional framework, the *ad hominem* character of irony is a function of the propositional content of the utterance; in our framework, it is a function of the ease with which some originator of the opinion echoed can be recognized. The many cases where these two accounts make different predictions, as in (48), should make it possible to choose between them.

## 7. A FINAL EXAMPLE

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 2, Mark Antony says six times that Brutus is an honorable man. This is frequently cited as an example of irony, but on closer examination it raises a number of problems for the traditional theory. The first time Mark Antony says "Brutus is an

honorable man," there is no perceptible irony; the inclination is to take it as a propitiatory remark, suitable to an occasion where Mark Antony is about to give Caesar's funeral oration with Brutus's permission. It is not until he says it for the third time that the ironical interpretation is really forced on us, and from then on it increases in intensity. In the traditional framework, we would have to say that at the second or third repetition the literal meaning is replaced by the opposite figurative meaning—there can be no intermediate stage between literal and figurative interpretation.

In our framework, Mark Antony has to be seen from the very first as MENTIONING the proposition that Brutus is an honorable man. He first mentions it in a conciliatory tone of voice. No doubt it is not his own most personal opinion, but he is prepared to put it forward in a spirit of appeasement, echoing the sentiments of Brutus's supporters. Then, each time he repeats it, he mentions it in the context of further facts which make it clear that he is dissociating himself from it, more strongly each time: The irony is first hinted at, then strengthened, then forced home. Mark Antony carries his audience with him, through a series of successively more hostile attitudes to a proposition which itself remains unchanged from start to finish. At every stage the proposition is mentioned, and not used.

This example brings us back to our preliminary remark that the concept of irony itself is open to reconsideration, not just in its intension but also in its extension. In classical terms an utterance either is ironical or it is not. The picture we are suggesting is different: Although an utterance either is or is not a mention, a mention may be more or less ironical, with many intermediary and complex shades between stereotypical cases of irony and other kinds of echoic mention.

## 8. CONCLUSION

As an undersized boy trips over his own feet while coming in last in the school sports, one spectator turns to another and remarks:

(49) *It's a bird—it's a plane—it's Superman.*

This remark is clearly ironical. Because it is an actual quotation, it fits quite straightforwardly into our framework as a case of echoic mention; however, it poses considerable problems for both standard semantic and pragmatic accounts of irony. Within these frameworks, it would have to be analyzed as carrying the figurative meaning or conversational implicature in (50):

(50) *It's not a bird, it's not a plane, it's not Superman.*

But if (49) figuratively means or conversationally implicates (50)—which is literally true—it is hard to see why it would also be taken as a joke. There is a further problem for Grice's approach, since the implicature in (50) is completely uninformative in the context, and would itself violate the maxims of conversation. Our proposed analysis, by virtue of its ability to handle (49) and similar examples, proves both more explanatory and more general than either of the traditional alternatives.

Compared with traditional semantic approaches, Grice's approach to irony is radically pragmatic: The proper interpretation of an ironical utterance is assumed to consist solely of conversational implicatures, logically derived according to pragmatic patterns of inference. If what we have been arguing in this chapter is correct, then Grice's and other similar approaches to irony (and more generally to figures of speech) are too "radical" in one respect, and not "radical" enough in another.

In the first place, ironical utterances do have one essential semantic property: They are cases of mention, and are thus semantically distinguishable from cases where the same proposition is used in order to make an assertion, ask a question, and so on. As has been seen, this semantic distinction is crucial to the explanation of how ironical utterances are interpreted, and indeed why they exist. Without this distinction the echoic character of irony will be overlooked, and it will thus be impossible to make the correct prediction that where no echoing is discernible, an utterance, however false, uninformative or irrelevant, will never be ironical. In this respect, then, a purely logical-pragmatic approach to irony is too radical.

In a second respect, though, a logical-pragmatic approach to irony remains too close to a semantic one. In both cases it is assumed that the interpretation of an ironical utterance consists solely of propositions (whether entailments or implicatures) intended by the speaker and recoverable by the hearer. Now it has long been recognized that the understanding of figures of speech, and of irony in particular, has nonpropositional, nondeductive aspects. An ironical utterance carries suggestions of attitude—and sometimes, as in (49), of images—which cannot be made entirely explicit in propositional form. In this respect a logical-pragmatic model does not provide a better description—let alone a better explanation—than a semantic model. On the other hand, our analysis of irony as a case of echoic mention crucially involves the evocation of an attitude—that of the speaker to the proposition mentioned. This attitude may imply a number of propositions, but it is not reducible to a set of propositions. Our analysis thus suggests that a logical-pragmatic theory dealing with the

interpretation of utterances as an inferential process must be supplemented by what could be called a "rhetorical-pragmatic," or "rhetorical" theory dealing with evocation.<sup>8</sup>

To conclude: The value of current pragmatic theory, as inspired by Grice's work, lies mainly in the fact that it relieves semantics of a number of problems for which it can provide a more general and explanatory treatment. However, in the case of figurative utterances, the move from semantics to logical pragmatics merely creates a number of new problems, without providing solutions to many of the problems raised by the traditional semantic approach. Taking irony as an example, we have tried to show that, given an adequate semantic analysis of ironical utterances as echoic mentions, the problems with both the traditional semantic account and Grice's pragmatic account dissolve away. A number of problems still remain; what we are suggesting is that logical pragmatics must in turn be relieved of these problems, which can be given a more general and explanatory treatment within the rhetorical component of a radically extended pragmatic theory.

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